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ABSTRACT

The idea-centered freshman composition program at Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, North Carolina, functions not only to meet the immediate needs of freshmen writers, but also to promote the aims of liberal education. The program has three interrelated goals: (1) to engage freshmen writers in "college thinking," defined as giving reasons for one's belief about serious ideas; (2) to teach students the conventions of academic discourse; and (3) to help all students achieve a minimal level of competence in doing college writing. The components of the Abbey writing program--the means employed to achieve the stated goals--include assessment, classroom instruction, and instructional support through a campus-wide writing center. Assessment is used for placement of freshmen into the appropriate English course; for diagnosis of writing problems after students have enrolled in a writing course; and for determining competency of writers after they have completed English 101. Classroom instruction, which is the core of the program, can be characterized as idea-centered because it focuses on reading, discussing, and writing about serious ideas, such as feminism, civil disobedience, and poverty. The purpose of the writing center is to provide a tutoring service for all students who need help with one or more phases of the composing process. It offers ongoing individualized writing instruction, encourages a commitment to better writing at all levels of instruction, and brings an important social dimension to learning through peer tutoring. (An English 101 placement essay, scoring guide for essay evaluation, mid-semester examination, and final examination are attached.) (MM)

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DESIGNING AN IDEA-CENTERED FRESHMAN COMPOSITION PROGRAM TO EMPOWER STUDENT WRITERS

Belmont Abbey College, where I have taught for the past seven and a half years, is a small Catholic Benedictine liberal arts college of a thousand students in Belmont, North Carolina. It was founded in 1876 by Benedictine monks who still maintain their monastery on campus and who continue to teach and participate in the life of the college. Roughly half of the students at the College are from the state of North Carolina; most of these are southern by birth and Protestant. The other half are from the northeast, Georgia, and Florida and are predominately Catholic. The majority of entering freshmen are in the top half of their graduating high school class with an average SAT score slightly below the national average which is 904. The Abbey, then, could be characterized as a regional institution which attracts and educates average college students.

This, in brief, is the institutional context for the idea-centered freshman composition program which I intend to describe in my presentation this afternoon. To give you a sense of how the program functions not only to meet the immediate needs of freshmen writers but also to promote the aims of liberal education, I would first like to discuss the goals of the program which define its purpose, and, then, to examine the components of the program, which provide the means for achieving the stated goals. These components include assessment, classroom instruction, and instructional support through by a campus-wide writing center. When I outline the method of classroom instruction near the end of my presentation, I will, at that time, discuss the

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assumptions upon which the program is based and then conlcude by suggesting what connection exists between these assumptions and empowering student writers.

The program has three interrelated goals. The first is to engage freshmen writers in college thinking. College thinking can be defined as giving reasons for one's belief about serious ideas. In other words, the **object** of college thinking is serious ideas as these ideas are addressed and embodied in primary texts. The **activity** of college thinking is reason giving which involves first the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of a writer's position or the position of several writers followed by the synthesis of one's own position in response to the same or similar question at issue. The **end** or purpose of college thinking is to help students begin the process of developing a meaningful philosophy of life. A philosophy of life becomes meaningful if it has been earned through being challenged and tested by others--by the writers one reads, and by one's instructors and classmates. Its value, in addition to the intrinsic pleasures afforded contemplation, is that it provides a considered perspective from which to evaluate new knowledge and judge the actions of others.

College thinking, I would argue, then, is at the heart of liberal learning in that it makes knowledge vital rather than inert, to use the distinction made by Alfred North Whitehead in his essay, "The Aims of Education" (1929). For Whitehead, vital knowledge is connected knowledge created by each mind for the purpose of making sense of the world. Inert knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge which is "merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations" (1). College thinking, because it encourages students to throw what they are learning into "fresh combinations," because it is primarily concerned with

ideas rather than information, and because it focuses on an investigation of ends rather than means, has the potential to begin the life-long process of liberating those who engage in this activity from their ignorance, their passions, and the limitations of accepted opinion.

The second goal of the program, which follows from the first, is to teach students the conventions of academic discourse. If reason giving is the central activity of college thinking, as I have suggested, then students need to learn the conventions of this activity. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the activity of reason giving is the essential activity of academic life for both students and faculty (even though all may not engage in it) and that it is this activity which distinguishes colleges and universities as institutions from other social institutions. Therefore, while the specifics of discourse conventions vary from discipline to discipline, there is, nevertheless, a generalized set of conventions which has application to all disciplines. These conventions require that writers develop a sense of what constitutes adequate proof; learn that proof is given in the context of what someone else has written or said; be able to construct an argument which is made intelligible by its unity and coherence; and follow the accepted procedures for documenting the research, ideas, and opinions of others. Students learn these conventions best when they are used in the service of college thinking rather than being taught for their own sake. That is, one more readily develops a sense of what constitutes adequate proof by reading and responding to the arguments of others rather than by being taught rules of evidence or by reviewing model arguments detached from a substantive context.

The third goal of the program grows out of the first two. That is, because engaging students in college thinking and teaching them the conventions of academic discourse are vital to their participation in liberal

learning, the third goal is to help all students achieve a minimal level of competence for doing college writing. Thus, in keeping with what has been said above, such competence should be measured in descending order of importance (1) by the quality of a writer's ideas, (2) by development, that is, by the ability to state general principles on the basis of specific evidence, (3) by coherence, which means what is written can be understood and can be perceived as an attempt to address a question at issue systematically, and (4) by the nature and frequency of error.

Establishing goals for a writing program is important for several reasons. First, goals make it possible to create a coherent program in which there is a sound connection between means and ends. What happens in the classroom and in other phases of the program is made intelligible and given direction by these goals. Second, goals provide the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of a program. In a time of tight budgets and growing concern over outcomes assessment, clearly articulated goals are essential for understanding and appraising the connection between writing instruction and writing improvement. And third, goals that result from English faculty deliberations and reflect a consensus of the department help promote cooperation among English department faculty in the teaching of writing. This is true not only because writing instructors perceive that they are working toward a common end which is good for morale, but also because the confusion and disagreements over means, especially those related to approaches to the teaching of writing, can be resolved to the extent that what one student experiences in one section of freshman composition is not radically different from what another student might experience in any other section.

The components of the Abbey writing program--the means employed to achieve the stated ends--include assessment, classroom instruction, and

instructional support through a campus-wide writing center. Let me begin with assessment. Assessment in the Abbey program is used for three purposes: (1) for placement of freshmen into the appropriate English course, (2) for diagnosis of writing problems after students have enrolled in a writing course, and (3) for determining competency of writers after they have completed English 101.

For the purpose of **placement**, during freshman orientation each fall, all freshmen are required to write a placement essay. They are given sixty minutes to plan, write, and proofread a 300 to 500 word essay on a serious topic which asks them to do essentially two things: state their point of view about the topic and develop reasons in support of that point of view. For the topic and instructions to a recent placement essay, see the handout entitled "English 101 Placement Essay." Last fall, for example, the topic was "a common educational practice in American high schools that should be changed." Students were instructed to identify a common educational practice which they thought should be changed, to state their point of view about this practice, and to offer reasons in support of their position. The topic and the prompt for the topic were designed to elicit the same kind of writing students are expected to do in English 101, namely offer reasons in support of a point of view on a serious subject.

The essays, which usually number around 250, are then holistically evaluated by all members of the English department and by two or three faculty from outside the department who have a special interest in evaluation of writing because they assign considerable writing in their courses. Last fall, for example, in addition to the eight English faculty, a professor from philosophy, another from economics, and the director of the adult degree program participated in the holistic reading. Next fall, however, because of

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the one-week workshop on writing across the curriculum which will be offered in the late summer, I anticipate an additional eight faculty (three from business, two from chemistry, one from education, one from art history, and one from foreign language) to help with the reading. This will be a one year windfall.

During the holistic reading of placement essays, each essay is read "blindly" by two readers and evaluated according to the scoring guide used by the English department for the evaluation of all written work in freshman English. The scoring guide, which is the handout entitled "Scoring Guide for Essay Evaluation," contains five levels which correspond to A, B, C, D, and F grades, and a sixth category for essays not addressing the topic. Each of the five levels on the scoring guide is described in terms of what is required at that level for ideas, development, coherence, and correctness. Essays whose scores differ by two or more points are given to a third reader. Last fall only nine of the 250 essays needed to be evaluated by a third reader; the year before it was 16.

Students with a combined essay score of three or better, and who have scored a minimum of 500 on the verbal portion of the SAT and have a 53 or better on the TSWE (Test of Standard Written English), are placed into English 102, a composition-based introduction to literature course. Those who do not meet the above criteria are placed in English 101. More than ninety percent of Abbey freshmen are placed into English 101.

The second purpose for assessment is **diagnosis.** There is nothing particularly sophisticated about this aspect of the Abbey program. Those students placed in English 101, who appear to be in danger of failing the course because of D or F grades on the first two essay assignments, are assigned to the writing center for additional help where they remain for

regular tutoring until they are able to pass an exit essay with a C or better. The exit essay is administered by the writing center on a topic related to English 101 course readings and evaluated by the student's writing instructor. Each instructor, at the time of assigning a student to the writing center, completes a writing center form which asks the instructor to identify any specific problems the student may be having. Thus, there is some attempt to pinpoint particular writing problems; however, experience has taught us that most Abbey freshmen assigned to the writing center are there not because of errors at the sentence level, but because they are unable to consistently string together a series ideas in a coherent manner so that they support a point of view.

The third purpose for assessment in the Abbey program is determining **minimal competence** for doing college writing. Minimal competence is determined at the time of the final examination for the one semester English 101 course. English 101 students are given three hours to write a 400 to 500 word essay on a common topic related to the English 101 course readings. As in the case of the placement essay and all writing assignments in the English 101 course, the English 101 final examination requires that students state their point of view in response to the final examination topic and develop reasons in support of that point of view. In doing so, they are permitted to use the course reader, the handbook, and a dictionary, in other words, what they would normally used to write an essay outside of class.

For a sample final examination, see the handout labeled "English 101 Final Examination." The topic for this examination was "A significant factor which either contributes to or undermines the quality of life in America." Students were instructed to select one item from the list of twelve "significant factors" which represent the topics discussed in all English 101

sections over the course of the semester. One could argue, for example, that the American dream undermines the quality of life in American, or that feminism contributes to the quality of life in America. The list of significant factors in combination with the point of view gave students, for this particular examination, a potential choice of twenty-four specific thesis statements.

Each essay is evaluated by two readers, the course instructor and another English 101 instructor, and graded pass/fail. When there are disagreements between the course instructor and the second reader, I serve as the third reader. On the average, approximately 18% of English 101 students must repeat the course: 10% because they fail the final examination, 3% because they fail the course, and 5% because they quit coming to class and receive a WF. So that students are given experience with this kind of examination, the mid-semester examination is conducted in a similar fashion. That is, students write on a common topic drawn from course readings, and their essays are evaluated by the course instructor and a second reader. For a sample mid-semester examination, see the handout entitled "English 101 Mid-semester Examination."

Assessment is a necessary component of any writing program; moreover, when assessment is tied to a shared standard for essay evaluation, there are several benefits which follow. First, evaluation seems less arbitrary to students not only because all students are given copies of the scoring guide and instructed in the criteria, but also because there is consistency in essay evaluation from one section of English 101 to the next. Second, the criteria is a valuable instructional tool; it tells students what they need to do to improve their writing and it provides the basis for training new full-time and adjunct faculty in the process of essay evaluation. And third, a shared

criteria is an important factor in making it possible to promote writing across the curriculum in both core and upper level courses. That is, because the criteria helps demystify essay evaluation, and to a lesser extent, the place of writing in the classroom, instructors outside the English department are more inclined to make writing an integral part of the instruction in their courses.

The second component of the Abbey writing program is classroom instruction. Classroom instruction, which is the core of the program, can be characterized as idea-centered because it focuses on reading, discussing, and writing about serious ideas.

Students **read** essays expressing opposing views on various questions at issue pertaining to such topics as civil disobedience, education, feminism, identity, poverty, technology, and the good life. So that they are given ample practice in the close reading, analysis, and evaluation of argumentative texts, students are required to perform three tasks for each assigned essay: to take notes on what they read, to reconstruct the propositions of the writer's argument, and to evaluate the argument in light of the writer's intention. Preparation of this kind for the students frees the instructor to engage them in discussion and debate rather than taking class time to review what they've already read.

These readings, then, provide the context for class **discussion** on various questions at issue. For example, one of the first questions I consider in English 101 is whether or not liberal education is a waste of time and money. Caroline Bird, in her essay "College Is a Waste of Time and Money," makes a fairly compelling case, although somewhat dated, that it is a waste of time and money. In contrast, Otto Friedrich in "Five Ways to Wisdom" indicates that a liberal education, irrespective of the curriculum, not only

has the potential to transform the individual but improve society as well. Students have a potential interest in this question because most are first-time freshmen apprehensive about what they are in for and because many hold only the foggiest notions about the nature of liberal learning, having thought little beyond the accepted view that a college education leads to a better job. Discussion on this and other topics is valuable in that it gives students an opportunity to test their own opinions, which have been further developed by the assigned readings, against those of others in the class. Discussion of this nature is helpful preparation for writing because it may clarify ambiguities in or confusion about a particular text, but more important, because it encourages students to discover and develop their own position in regard to a question at issue.

Writing is a natural response to reading about and discussing ideas, for it demands of students that they more fully consider and articulate their own opinions. Writing under these circumstances naturally engages students in the use of the conventions of academic discourse because they are attempting to offer good reasons in support of their beliefs. Continued practice in reason giving, therefore, helps students to develop a sense of what constitutes adequate proof, to learn that proof is given in the context of what someone else has written or said, and to intuit how to construct an argument made intelligible by its unity and coherence.

This approach to classroom instruction is based on the following assumptions about how students learn language. First, form follows function. Students learn the written code, not by memorizing rules or by practicing isolated skills, but by having a need to achieve some purpose with language. That is, because language is acquired holistically for the purpose of communicating meaning, basic or developmental writers, like many of the

writers in English 101 at Belmont Abbey College, are most in need of reading and writing for meaning. In fact, they would, in all likelihood, be retarded in their growth as writers by more instruction in grammar, or in the formal patterns of exposition such a description, illustration, comparison, contrast, and definition, or in the requirements for paragraph development or for the five paragraph theme.

Second, meaning is a social construction. It is engendered, created, and expressed in a social context; for, writers of both literary and non-literary texts offer interpretations of human experience in response to the interpretations made by others. Because meaning making is a communal activity, it is crucial that students read texts which offer interpretations of human experience and that they be given the opportunity to respond to these interpretations in discussion and in writing so that they participate in the process of creating and communicating meaning.

And third, reading is essential to writing improvement. This is true for a couple of reasons. First, comprehension usually precedes production. That is, writers engage in writing because they are motivated to write and because they have something to write about. Reading, along with discussion and reflection, provides the so-called "comprehensible input" needed to generate discourse. And second, the patterns and principles of written language are internalized through extensive reading. The point is that writing practice and instruction alone, without reading and reflection on that reading, are not sufficient in and of themselves to ensure that students will acquire the written code.

The third and last component of the Abbey composition program is the writing center. The purpose of the writing center is to provide a tutoring service, not just for English 101 students who are in danger of failing the

course, but for all Belmont Abbey College students who need help with one or more phases of the composing process. Tutors help students learn to discover what they need to say, to plan more effectively what they have discovered, and to revise what they have said so that it becomes a more compelling statement of their position. The center is not intended to be either an editing service or a grammar lab.

The center staff includes a director, who has a Ph.D. in linguistics, and several student tutors. The director, in addition to teaching two sections of English 101, is responsible for running the day-to-day business of the center and training the tutors. First-time tutors enroll in English 452 for three credits. The course prepares them to be tutors by acquainting them with some of the most important literature on tutoring writing, by giving them practice in tutoring through role playing, by training them to evaluate essays in accordance with the English department scoring guide, and by having them work with an experienced tutor when they first begin to counsel writers in the center. Tutors who continue to work in the writing center during a subsequent semester enroll in English 453, also for three credits. In addition to regular tutoring in the center, these tutors meet once a week to discuss readings in composition theory and related fields, and each undertakes a research project which grows out of their tutoring experience and the work of the writing center.

The writing center has several important benefits. First, it offers on-going individualized writing instruction to all students. Second, it encourages a commitment to better writing at all levels of instruction, making writing improvement a college-wide concern and not simply the responsibility of the English department during a student's freshman year. And third, it brings an important social dimension to learning through peer tutoring,

enriching both student and tutor.

These, then, are the goals and the components of the Abbey writing program. Let me conclude with the following. If writing instruction is to empower student writers, it must, like liberal learning, give them practice in the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of ideas, on the one hand, and encourage them to develop their own position about these ideas, on the other. To empower students, therefore, means to educate them. This cannot be achieved by teaching skills, nor by imparting information; becoming educated, rather, is a result of thinking oneself more deeply into the world and developing a perspective about what it means to be an acting and thinking being in that world. Improving skills and retaining information are functions of these activities, not ends to be pursued for their own sake. Unfortunately, however, much undergraduate education is similar to the American diet. There is a great deal of selection, but not much of it is particularly nutritious. Freshman composition is intended to function like the multivitamin. It is added to the curricular diet to compensate for what the curriculum is not doing: teaching students to write. If more college courses, I would argue, were idea-centered, rather than skill- or information-centered, and required students to read, discuss, interpret, and write about the ideas set forth in important texts, the number of sections of freshman composition could be greatly reduced and perhaps the course could be eliminated from the undergraduate curriculum altogether.

ENGLISH 101 PLACEMENT ESSAY

Directions: You will have 60 minutes to plan, write, and proofread an essay on the topic below. Given the topic and time restriction, you should attempt to write a finished essay by developing the topic to what length is possible (300 to 500 words).

TOPIC: A common educational practice in American high schools that should be changed.

In your essay, you should:
(1) introduce your subject
by identifying the common educational practice and
by stating your thesis (point of view) about this common educational practice, and
(2) develop reasons in support of your thesis.

At least two evaluators will read your essay and assign it a score. In addition to evaluating the quality of your ideas, they will be paying special attention to whether you
--state your thesis clearly,
--develop your thesis coherently and in sufficient detail,
--use well-formed sentences and paragraphs,
--follow standard practices in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Take a few minutes to think about what you want to say before you start writing. Leave yourself a few minutes at the end of the period to proofread and make corrections.

You may cross out and add information as necessary. Although neatness and handwriting will not be scored, you should write as legibly as possible so that evaluators can read your essay easily.

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SCORING GUIDE FOR ESSAY EVALUATION*

1: A paper in this category will complete all the tasks set by the assignment. It will be distinguished by the superior quality of the writer's ideas and insights which are developed in a complete, clear, and orderly fashion. It may even introduce an original interpretation of the writing topic. In addition to being virtually free from errors in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, and spelling, the paper will be characterized by felicitous use of language and maturity of expression.

2: A paper in this category may slight, but not ignore, one of the tasks of the assignment or deal with it only by implication, but the writer will demonstrate a clear understanding of the writing topic. It may not be as thoughtful, insightful, or as carefully reasoned as a **1** paper, but it will not be characterized by mere statement and restatement of ideas at a high level of generality. Although the paper may have minor weaknesses in paragraphing, it will contain evidence of the writer's ability to organize information into unified and coherent units. It will be largely free from serious errors in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, and spelling.

3: A paper in this category will execute the assignment less completely or less systematically than a **1** or a **2** paper does, but the paper will come to terms with the basic tasks of the assignment. The paper may lack originality of insight, and the reasoning may be less precise and less discriminating than one would find in a **1** or **2** paper, but it will not be flawed by incoherence. It may insufficiently develop a point or two, but it will give evidence of the writer's ability to support key ideas. It will be organized and paragraphed well enough to allow the reader to move with relative ease through the discourse, though there may be some disjointedness and lack of focus. It may contain errors in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, and spelling, but not so frequently as to call into question the writer's command of the conventions of the standard dialect or to consistently distract the reader from the content.

4: A paper in this category will attempt to address the tasks of the assignment but will treat them, at best, minimally. Reasons offered in support of the thesis may seem to trivialize the topic or be so obvious as to make their statement unnecessary. The paper, on the whole, will be underdeveloped and may remain at a fairly high level of generality. It may also, on occasion, lapse into incoherence. It may contain several errors in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, or spelling so that the reader is distracted from the substance of the essay.

5: A paper will fall into this category if it shows serious difficulty managing the tasks of the assignment; OR if it is so markedly underdeveloped that key ideas stand with little or no support; OR if the paper is flawed by incoherence (at the essay, paragraph, or sentence level); OR if it contains numerous errors in sentence construction (fragments, comma splices, or fused sentences; mistakes in agreement or pronoun reference; or shifts in tense), usage (word choice), mechanics (punctuation or capitalization), or spelling. While the total effect of such a paper may not be chaotic, the writer's control of the material and language is uncertain.

6: A paper in this category is off the topic.

*Adapted from Edward M. White, Teaching and Assessing Writing, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986, 135-36.

ENLISH 101 FINAL EXAMINATION

Name_____ Fall 1988

Directions: Write a coherent, well developed essay (400 to 500 words) on the topic below. You will have 3 hours to complete your essay. You may use the Borzoi College Reader, the handbook, and a dictionary if you choose. No notes or journal entries are permitted.

Please use the paper provided by your instructor. Write on every other line, in ink, and only on one side of the paper. Be sure to give your essay a title, and use this as a cover sheet for your essay.

TOPIC: A significant factor which either contributes to or undermines the quality of life in America.

First, select one item from the list of "significant factors" below. This item, in your opinion, either contributes to or undermines the quality of life in America. Second, based on your reading in the Borzoi College Reader, develop reasons which make it clear in just what way the significant factor you have chosen either contributes to or undermines the quality of life in America. Argue only one side of the issue.

In your essay, you should
- --identify the significant factor you have chosen,
- --state your point of view about this significant factor (namely, that it contributes to or undermines the quality of life in America), and
- --develop reasons in support of your point of view.

List of "Significant Factors":

American dream	good life
conscience and moral responsibility	identity
democracy	poverty (have and have-nots)
education	technology
ethics in business and government	television
feminism	work

At least two evaluators will read your essay. In addition to evaluating the quality of your ideas, they will be paying special attention to whether you
- --state your thesis clearly,
- --develop your thesis coherently and in sufficient detail,
- --use well-formed sentences and paragraphs,
- --follow standard practices in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, and spelling.

ENGLISH 101 MID-SEMESTER EXAMINATION

Name_____ Fall 1988

Directions: In class, on the day designated by your instructor for the English 101 mid-semester examination, you should come to class prepared to write a coherent, well developed essay (300 to 500 words) on the topic below. You will have 50 minutes to complete your essay. In addition, you are allowed to use the Borzoi College Reader, the handbook, and a dictionary if you choose, but neither notes nor journal entries are permitted.

Please use the paper provided by your instructor. Write on every other line, in ink, and only on one side of the paper. Be sure to give your essay a title and use this as a cover sheet for your essay.

TOPIC: A significant factor which contributes to or hinders the development of the individual.

First, select one item from the list of "significant factors" below. This item, in your opinion, should be a significant factor which contributes to or hinders the development of the individual. Second, based on your reading in the Borzoi College Reader, develop reasons which make it clear in just what way the significant factor you have chosen contributes to or hinders the development of the individual.

In your essay, you should
- --identify the significant factor you have chosen,
- --state your point of view about this significant factor, and
- --develop reasons in support of your point of view.

List of "Significant Factors":

civil disobedience
conscience and moral responsibility
democracy
education
ethics in business and government
feminism
identity
language
media
thinking
writing

At least two evaluators will read your essay. In addition to evaluating the quality of your ideas, they will be paying special attention to whether you
- --state your thesis clearly,
- --develop your thesis coherently and in sufficient detail,
- --use well-formed sentences and paragraphs,
- --follow standard practices in sentence construction, usage, mechanics, and spelling.